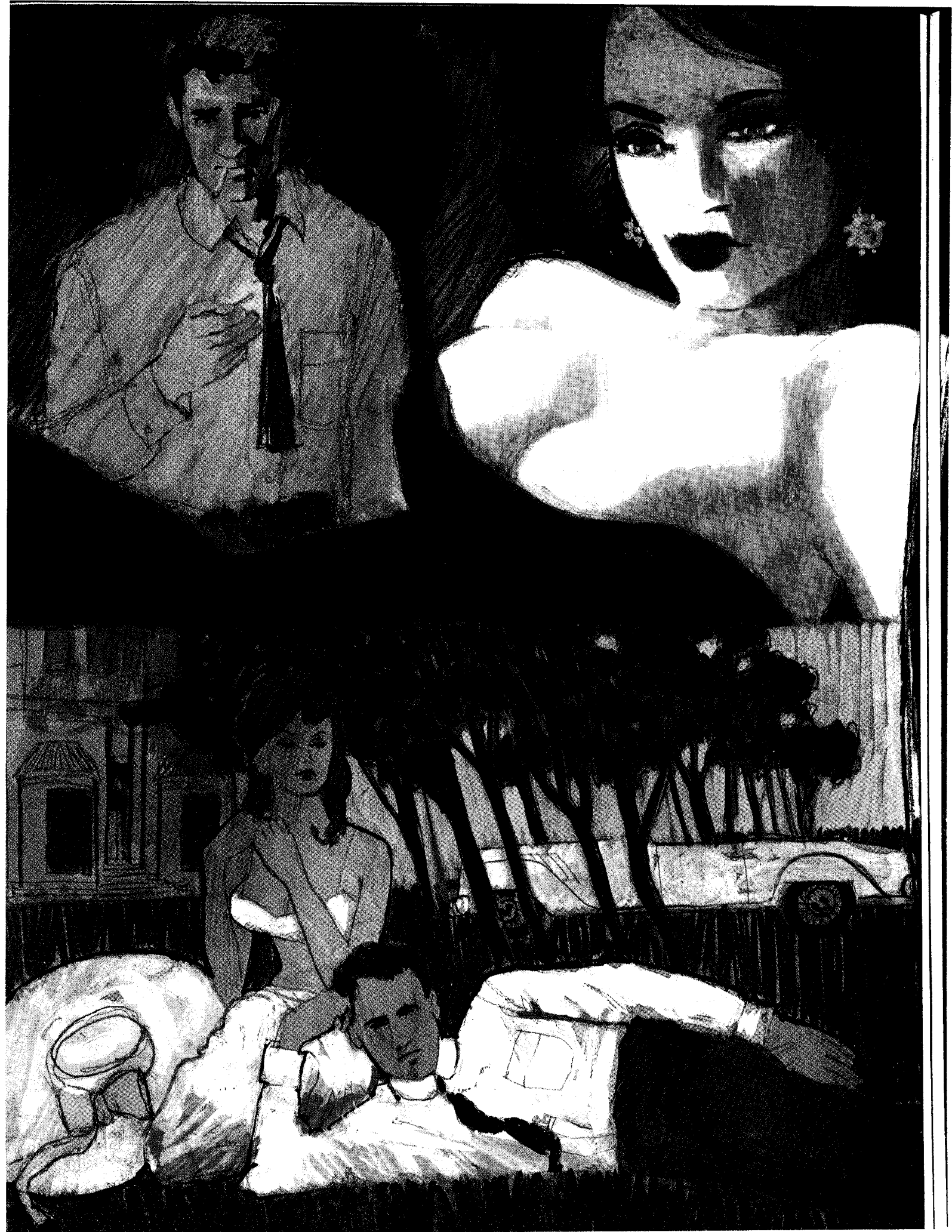


CONTENTS

GO	Ann Taylor	4
<i>Two horny chicks on the rocky road to hell</i>		
CHICKENRABBIT	Austin Mason	6
<i>Moonshine in the still, blood in the briarpatch, rape in the cabin</i>		
THE SEXUAL ASPECT OF E.S.P.	Paul Brock	10
<i>Eerie mysteries of mental telepathy and their relation to sex</i>		
RIFF	Harlan Ellison	14
<i>A swinging sax player and the bitch who cut off his wind</i>		
PEOPLE ARE FUNNY, ESPECIALLY MEN AND WOMEN	Georgie Starbuck Galbraith	18
<i>Some aggravating "Why-is-it?"s of the battle of the sexes</i>		
HONOR AMONG THIEVES	Temple Williams	22
<i>Getting to the top in the Syndicate — the scientific way</i>		
RETURN TO THE SEA	Gary Paulsen	26
<i>The new American adventure — the conquest of "Inner Space"</i>		
THE HUNTER	Robert N. Owen	30
<i>Which was the deadlier enemy — the bear or the woman?</i>		
ELMER — THE INFALLIBLE BARTENDER	Adobe James	35
<i>Automation may soon be creeping into your favorite pub</i>		
DEATH CLIMB	Jay Solo	42
<i>The most demanded hired killer in the Alps: his rise — and fall</i>		
HOW PURE WAS OUR PURITAN	Earle Schell	50
<i>Boozing and bawdry in cold old New England</i>		
STORM WIFE	Wilton G. Beggs	54
<i>He knew of Bonny's sickness — but not of its sexual nature</i>		
A MOMENT AGO THERE WAS ONLY MADNESS	Raymond Friday Locke	58
<i>Black, white and blue — the terrible colors of insanity</i>		
THE TALE OF THE BARBER'S SECOND BROTHER	Robert Blake	66
<i>The story of a tease — from the adult Arabian Nights</i>		
THE ISLAND	Ralph E. Hayes	70
<i>Giant rats, a girl on the loose, and a Golden Madonna</i>		
INCIDENT AT ROSA'S	Howard H. Hamilton	74
<i>Strange encounter with a Mexico City prostitute</i>		
THE RED KNIGHT: HERO OR HOAX	Eldon Tasch	78
<i>Startling facts about the infamous Baron von Richthofen</i>		
ADAM'S BEDSIDE TALES		82
<i>Chuckles, jokes and bawdy belly laughter</i>		
BIG TONY	Jack Ritchie	86
<i>Three nubile wenches and a big-time operator</i>		
GENTLEMEN PREFER BLUNTS	Marion Martin	90
<i>The fine art of mastering a man's smoke</i>		
THE TENNESSEE STUD	Con Sellers	94
<i>He just opened his mouth — and drove the girls wild</i>		
THE AMERICAN VERSION	Charles Michelli	98
<i>It was his turn to play with her — but this time for real</i>		

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JARED RUTTER, Editor-in-chief/JOHN R. GERARD, Associate Editor /FRANK EDWARD LEE, Art Director





*Big Tony had gone legit,
but the "best
people" still
scorned his
nubile daughters . . .
Something
had to be done!*

BIG TONY

by JACK RITCHIE

■ GOT THREE DAUGHTERS and it's about time they got married," Big Tony said. He turned away from the French windows. "O'Brien, it's up to you to see that it gets done."

I gave it about two seconds thought. "You want me to go around and knock on doors and ask who wants to marry one of Big Tony's daughters?"

"No." He took a cigar out of the humidor. "Why do you think I moved out here to River Hills three years ago?"

"You wanted to be knee deep in the best people? But they won't talk to you and nobody will go out with your daughters?"

/ turn the page

TONY, from page 87

"Maybe I'll never get into the Country Club," Big Tony said, "but the girls don't have no trouble with the boys. How long since you saw them, O'Brien?"

"Four years. When you sent me out to the coast."

He nodded. "Well, they're better looking than ever."

"But still they can't get married?"

"It's like this, O'Brien. I'm their old man and my name still gets in the papers every once in a while, but not on the society pages." He paced back and forth on the deep rug. "I don't want to be one of them interfering parents, but I know what the score is, and it makes me sad."

He waved the cigar. "Like Angelina and Herbert Bradford. They're crazy about each other, but still he won't ask her."

"Why not?"

"Because Herbie's afraid of his old man. This Grover Bradford says that Herbie should wait for a girl whose ancestors used the Plymouth rock for a dock. And you know my own folks just missed getting steerage on the Titanic."

"What's the problem with Faustina?"

"Morley Wilson."

"What is he afraid of?"

"Fifteen-million dollars. That's what he won't get from his grandma if he marries Faustina."

"And he's not ready to give up fifteen-million dollars for Faustina?"

"Look, O'Brien," Big Tony said. "I don't blame the boy too much. A woman is a woman, but fifteen-million is fifteen-million."

"And I'm supposed to buck fifteen-million dollars and come up with a happy ending?"

Big Tony grinned. "When I sent you to the coast, it looked like everything was crumbling out there. I really didn't expect nothing. But you put everything together and ticking. So I admire anybody who does a job like you do and hope you can make another miracle back here."

"What's Cecelia's trouble?"

"Philip Courtland. He played football for one of them eastern colleges. Real class and he's got maybe a million in his own name."

"What's making him timid?"

"I don't know. But find out and do something about it."

One of the side doors opened and Cecelia walked into the room. "Well, if it isn't O'Brien. I haven't seen you in a long, long time." Her gray eyes studied me. "What made you leave the coast? Business?"

"A friendly visit," Big Tony said.

"He's staying here a while." He glanc-

ed at his watch. "I got a date with my golf pro. Why don't you show O'Brien around the place?"

Outside on the grounds, Cecelia said. "What's the real reason you're here?"

"You're not supposed to know."

She shrugged. "Have it your way." She indicated some hedges. "Just ahead of us you will find Angelina and Herbert Bradford holding hands. Every Tuesday and Thursday between two and four, Herbie sneaks away from the handball court at the Country Club and comes to look at Angelina."

We turned the hedge and found them sitting on a stone bench.

Angelina was dark and probably five foot two. "Hello, Mr. O'Brien," she said.

Cecelia smiled at them. "Here we have a repeat performance of the Montagues and the Capulets. Some-

ness associates," Cecelia said. "He has charge of disposing of bodies and things like that."

"I'll have to remember that," Courtland said.

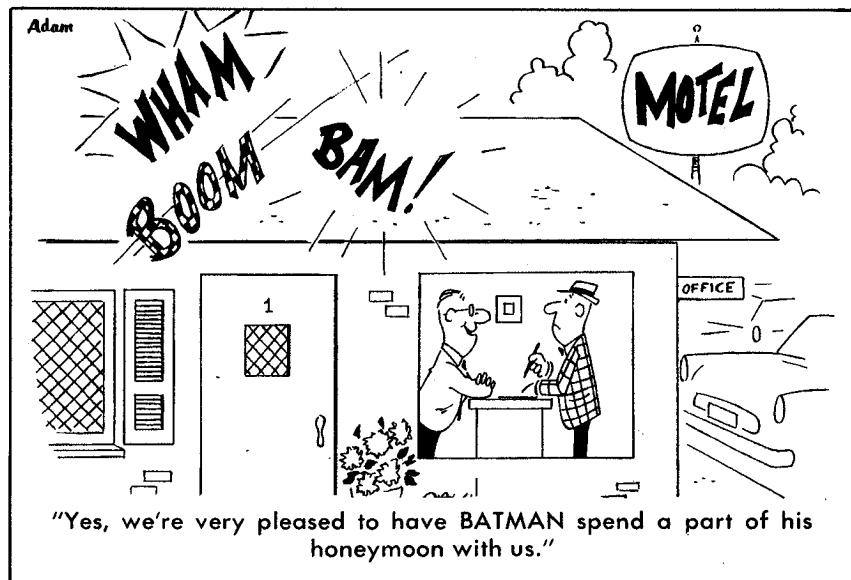
I watched them go and then drove to town and looked up a drinking friend at the *Morning Chronicle*. After we got out of the bar, he led me back to his paper's morgue and let me do some research.

THE NEXT MORNING, when I left Big Tony's place, I bought a briefcase. At the Bradford Laboratories, I gave my name to Grover Bradford's secretary and sat down to wait.

The secretary came out of his office in one minute. "Mr. Bradford will see you now."

It was a very large office, deeply carpeted.

Grover Bradford rose from the desk to shake hands. He was a large man



times I think I ought to kidnap the two of them and drive to the nearest justice of the peace."

Angelina shook her head. "We don't do things that way in the twentieth century, Cecelia."

Herbert nodded. "You see, Mr. O'Brien, despite the fact that my father doesn't care two beans about me, I still have a terrific need for his approval in everything I do. I am an extremely dependent personality."

A Jaguar turned into the driveway and pulled up in front of the house.

"My tennis date," Cecelia said. "But I can cancel it if you insist?"

"No. I have work to do."

The man behind the wheel got out and met us halfway.

"Philip Courtland," Cecelia said.

"And this is Jim O'Brien."

Courtland was about my size and we looked each other over.

"O'Brien is one of my father's busi-

and probably spent his week ends on a boat.

He waited until I was seated and then said, "My secretary tells me that you're from the Food and Drug Administration."

"That's right."

He waited warily.

"Mr. Bradford," I said. "Six months ago the Department ordered you to cease and desist your advertising claims concerning the merits of Sleep-So-Ezee. You were fined five-hundred dollars."

His face became expressionless. "That's in the past. It's a closed book."

I smiled. "That's correct. You stopped manufacturing Sleep-So-Ezee and you paid the five-hundred dollar fine. But that hardly made a dent in the million-and-a-half that Sleep-So-Ezee brought you before the Department got around to acting."

He said nothing.

"The Department works slow," I said. "And some people take advantage of that fact to make their money. I believe we were testing Sleep-So-Ezee for eighteen months before we finally got around to doing something about it."

I paused a moment. "And now we come to your new product, Dream-8. Two little pills at bed time and you sleep like a baby for eight hours. You began manufacturing and advertising Dream-8 two months ago. It should bring in another million dollars or so before the Department gets around to fining you another five-hundred."

He reached for his cigar humidor and brought out a panatella. He didn't offer one to me.

I waited until he lit up and then said, "The Department can act slow. Or it can act fast. It can act a million dollars from now. Or tomorrow."

He studied me. "Are you telling me that you got something to say about how fast it moves?"

This time I was the one who said nothing. But I smiled.

He leaned forward. "All right. I recognize blackmail when I hear it. How much money do you want?"

"No money," I said. "I've already been bought. I want happiness. For me. For you. For everybody."

His eyes narrowed. "Be more specific."

"A couple of days ago a man came to me. He wanted to know if I could get the Department to move fast in the case of Dream-8. I looked at the money he carried and told him that it could be arranged. But it turned out that he really didn't want me to do anything at all unless . . ." I paused.

He stepped in. "Unless what?"

"It seems that the man has a daughter named Angelina and he wants to make her happy. And her idea of happiness is to marry somebody named Herbert Bradford."

Grove Bradford's fist came down on the desk. "I won't allow it!"

I rose. "It's up to you, Mr. Bradford. A million or Herbie."

"Wait a minute," Bradford said. "How long can you make the Department hold off?"

"Possibly two years," I said. "If I work at it real hard."

His eyes brightened and he seemed to be adding figures.

I paused at the door. "One more thing, Mr. Bradford. Big Tony would like to get into the Country Club. See what you can do about it."

THAT EVENING at Big Tony's house, I met Morley Wilson. He was thin and balding and eventually he said, "It is most difficult to understand Grand-

mother. She absolutely forbids my marriage to Faustina and yet she does not object to my presence here. She even encourages it."

"Did you take your vitamin C tablets today?" Faustina asked.

Wilson nodded.

Faustina was naturally pallid and would probably remain that way until she died at the age of ninety-seven. "I don't think it will be too much longer before I can convince my doctor that I need thyroid pills, Morley."

"Look, Morley," Big Tony said. "I just bought a couple of canneries in Illinois. Corn, peas, and stuff like that in season. I'll give you the whole works as a wedding present."

Wilson considered that. "How much are they worth?"

"Three-hundred-thousand dollars."

Wilson shook his head. "No. I couldn't sleep nights. I'd still be thinking about the fifteen-million I lost."

Herbie Bradford and Angelina walked into the room.

"My father's given me permission to marry Angelina," he announced proudly.

"And it's going to be a big wedding," Angelina said. "We'll have a lawn party when we make the announcement of our engagement."

The next morning after breakfast, I went to the garage for my car.

Cecelia followed me. "More business?"

"That's right."

"But you won't tell me what it is?"

"Why should I?"

"Because I am the boss's daughter and because I'm curious. Things seem to be moving around here, and I have the strange feeling that somehow you're responsible. Now why don't you tell me what you're up to?"

"Maybe some day."

"When?"

"After you're married."

It was less than half a mile to Morley Wilson's grandmother.

HILDA WILSON WORE faded jodhpurs, mocassins, and a sweater.

"Hello, sonny," she said and continued on to the sideboard. "Care for a drink?"

"It's a little too early," I said.

"At my age," she said, "nothing's too early. Usually it's too late. Though I will say I haven't missed much." She downed a jigger of bourbon. "All right, sonny, what can I do for you?"

"Mrs. Wilson," I said. "I am an author. I specialize in writing the biographies of famous families. There are a few points which I would like to verify about the Wilson family before I go ahead."

"Keep talking, sonny."

"Well," I said. "Is it true that your husband founded the Wilson fortune in Colorado by jumping another man's claim?"

"Bill sure did. Rest his soul."

"And approximately one year later he shot a man in a drunken brawl?"

"Right between the eyes," Hilda said. "Bill would of got hung, but he bribed the jury."

I had the feeling that things weren't going exactly my way. "Mrs. Wilson," I said. "This biography doesn't *have* to be written."

"Is that right?" She went back to the sideboard, poured another drink, and brought it to me. "Swallow that, sonny. I think you'll need it."

I took the glass and waited.

"Sonny," she said. "So far six of you so-called authors have come to me with the story that they're going to write the biography of the Wilson family. And then they get around to telling me that they can restrain themselves from doing the job if I just slip them ten-thousand dollars or so. Is that what you had in mind?"

I downed the drink and said nothing.

Hilda Wilson went on. "The Wilson family isn't so well-known that anybody really gives a damn what it did. All my friends know about us anyway, and I don't care what my enemies or strangers know or think. How much were you going to ask for? Ten-thousand? Fifteen?"

"I wasn't going to ask for money."

"But you *were* going to ask for something? What?"

"None of your business."

She laughed. "Would you care for another drink, sonny?"

"Bring the bottle," I said. "And damn it, don't call me sonny."

She brought the bottle and two glasses. "You remind me a lot of my husband. I'll call you Bill."

She pulled up a chair.

"Why the hell won't you let your grandson marry Faustina?" I demanded.

Her bright blue eyes sparkled. "So that's it? You were going to blackmail me into telling Morley to go ahead? Why do you think I let Morley go over to Big Tony's house all the time?"

"I pass."

"Morley is a fool," Hilda said. "He has eyes but he won't see. I want him to marry Cecelia."

I stared at my empty glass. "Cecelia?"

"Sure", Hilda said. "Faustina is pretty enough, but Cecelia's the one with the brains and the spunk."

I thought about that. "Okay. Let's put it this way. If you were Cecelia,

—turn to page 93

TONY, from page 89

would you marry Morley?"

She reached for the bottle. "If he had fifteen-million I would."

"Big Tony has a few million of his own," I said. "I don't think money would interest Cecelia."

We were silent through another drink.

Finally Hilda sighed. "All right, Bill. Morley's no prize and I guess I was hoping for too much. Maybe he and Faustina will be happy sharing each other's vitamin pills."

WHEN I GOT back to Tony's place, he was putting his golf bag on the front seat of his car. "What do you know? Grover Bradford invited me to the Country Club. I got the feeling that from now on I'm in."

That evening Morley Wilson came to the house. "My grandmother's approved my marriage to Faustina," he announced.

"Did you take your salt tablets today?" Faustina asked.

Morley nodded.

Big Tony waited until he and I were alone.

"Damned if you didn't do it," he said. "And in less than forty-eight hours." He puffed his cigar. "And now I suppose you'll tackle Philip Courtland?"

"Sure."

I decided to see Courtland on Monday, but I didn't have to wait that long. He came to see me Saturday afternoon.

He studied me and then said. "You're Big Tony's right hand man?"

"Something like that."

"You've done a lot of things for him?"

"A lot."

That seemed to satisfy him. "How would you like to make some money? Big money?"

"I wouldn't mind."

He decided to light a cigarette before he went on. "I've got some warehouses in town. If they should happen to burn down, I'd be grateful. Twenty-thousand dollars worth."

I grinned. "You want me to burn down some warehouses for the insurance money? I thought you had a million stashed away."

Some color came to his cheekbones. "Never mind what I have or haven't got. Do you want the job or don't you?"

I nodded. "All right. But I don't want money."

He stared at me suspiciously. "What the hell do you want?"

For a minute I thought I wasn't going to tell him, but then I said. "I want you to ask Cecelia to marry you."

His eyes flickered. "That's your price?"

"You heard me."

He took a few slow drags on his cigarette and eyed me carefully. "If that's the pay you want," he said, "I'll do it."

I went to the door and opened it. "Go ahead and ask."

He shook his head. "No. The warehouses go first."

When he was gone, I went to the liquor cabinet.

Big Tony came back from the Country Club about an hour later and I told him all about it.

He rubbed his neck. "So he wants us to burn down his warehouses? What the hell does he think we are?"

"The same thing everybody else does."

Big Tony shook his head. "I been legit for so long I don't know nobody who would burn down a warehouse. I'll have to give it some thought."

I reached for the bottle and poured another drink.

Cecelia came into the room and leaned over my chair. "What were you doing in California, O'Brien? Taking people for rides and kidnapping babies?"

"I've been taking the little drug-stores Tony bought and knitting them into a chain," I said. "I haven't killed anybody since I was five, but I think I could start again now." I looked up at her. "What the hell makes Philip Courtland so special?"

She blinked. "Special? Who said he's special?"

"Then why do you want to marry him?"

"Who said I wanted to marry him?"

"Then you *don't*?"

"Of course not. He's asked me a dozen times. Isn't that right, Dad?"

I looked over at Tony, but he was busy looking for a cigar.

I took a deep breath and went to the phone. When I got Philip Courtland, I said, "Burn down your own damn warehouses."

I hung up and glared at Big Tony. "What's this all about?"

He lit the cigar. "When I sent for you, O'Brien, I didn't think you'd get Angelina married. Or Faustina. I didn't think anybody could and I didn't expect anything."

"So why did you send for me in the first place?"

Big Tony grinned. "Cecelia's twenty-six and I thought it was about time she got married. Even if I had to reach to the west coast to find somebody I liked."

He went to the door and turned. "I leave the rest up to you, O'Brien. You're the operator."



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